

Outside Looking In

The family wondered if they would come for them soon. Late in the night, would they hear an ominous knock at their wooden door? Had their time finally arrived? How long could they stay in their cozy, safe home before they would be stripped away from the lives they had built? Fear trapped them, forcing them to wait for their fate to be determined. Would they stay together as a family or would they be forced away from their loved ones? They had heard stories of families being stripped apart. What would happen to them during this intense time? Could they hide in order to escape the camps without being caught and punished? They soon found out that their lives were never going to be the same as they once were. Soon after the war started, they were forced away from everything that they knew. World War II was in full swing, and they were perceived as outcasts, an alien race that needed to be removed. They lost everything and were labeled as outsiders—dangerous, nameless outcasts, despised in the country in which they live. Even their own former friendly neighbors turned their backs on them, refusing to help this isolated race. People they had known for years suddenly had nothing to do with them. Why did others hate them so much? How did they become a threat to the community? They weren't the problem! How could life change so drastically in such a short period of time? They wondered about the answers to these questions and more as they were bused into internment camps, labeled as numbers, not people. These desolate camps would bring even more lasting issues than they ever knew were possible to their forgotten identities.

To gain a better perspective on this tragic time, a young girl shared her story of her time in the camp with the rest of the world. Her soft words conveyed the story of how her family was stripped apart, never to be the same again. Her story is not that of another young girl, a young girl of Jewish origins forced into the concentrations camps of Germany during World War II. Her name wasn't Anne Frank, so who was she? She and her family suffered through harsh living conditions, a loss of identity, a stripping away of family ties, and complete humiliation.

Jeanne was a young girl who in *Farewell to Manzanar* shared the struggles she and her family faced during WWII. Wartime hysteria caused her family to abandon the life they had worked so assiduously to create. Initially, her own father was taken away without any notice, not to be seen for almost a year later. Parting with nothing, the other members of her family were automatically forced into an isolated camp where they spent several years behind barbed wire, eventually being reunited with the patriarch of their family. Manzanar War Relocation Center was a camp created to detain individuals during the war. There, seven-year-old Jeanne and her family spent three and a half years of their lives. She described the area as a desolate place with non-insulated barracks that housed numerous families. Each barrack was a sparse and dark room with floors made of long rough-cut boards, filled with numerous families. Open crevices were everywhere, which allowed harsh, cold weather to enter the room. Jeanne's family was forced to find any resources they could to fill these open gaps to keep out the detrimental weather. Stories circulated in the camp about people who tried to escape being killed. Leading to intense fear, this caused the captives to simply allow this treatment to continue. Physical responses to the camps came with many individuals becoming very ill, losing weight, and

having extreme difficulty walking the long distance from the barracks to the lavatories or cafeteria. Emotional responses to life behind barbed wire also occurred. Depression, shame, and loss were felt frequently during incarceration. Life in the camps was very uneventful for most, often being described as a total waste of life. Shame or haji was a very similar feeling in these experiences as well. In particular, many felt an extreme humiliation simply using the bathroom. When the camps were first made, there were no walls for privacy in the bathroom, so toilets were completely open. The showers were also public, which made many women feel a loss of dignity, including Jeanne's own mother. Her family was humiliated, lost their identities, and family ties. They were affected emotionally and physically during their relocation, which transformed their lives forever.

And now for the bigger picture... Jeanne Wakatsuki's story is not that of a Jewish prisoner in the concentration camps of Germany during WWII. Her story is of a Japanese American citizen forced into the internment camps of the United States during the very same war. How could something like this happen in the United States, a country founded on the concepts of justice for all and independence? Throughout the history of the United States, there have been many triumphs, but there are also shocking truths that many Americans have never heard about regarding our nation, a nation built on freedom. Fear is defined as "a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, or pain, whether the threat is real or imagined." Fear led the United States of America to incarcerate over 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast of the USA. Fear led the US into a shameful act—fear of the unknown. Fear of the 'what if.' The

detention of Japanese Americans demonstrates the effect that fear can cause a family, community, and resilient country.

One of the only attacks in history on United States soil, the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, led to radical transformations in our country. Sadly, it created intense speculation about the loyalty of United States citizens of Japanese ancestry. The result of this horrific, unfathomable attack was America's immediate entrance into the war and the subsequent removal of Japanese Americans from their homes and communities on the West Coast. When we hear of concentration camps, our first thoughts are often of the concentration camps during the Holocaust; however, we can draw a comparison between the camps in Germany and those in the United States. While the United States did not engage in acts of genocide on Japanese Americans, they did take them away from their homes and communities due to wartime hysteria. When the camps finally closed in 1945, many inhabitants had nowhere to go. They were affected emotionally and physically during their relocation to the internment camps, which transformed their lives forever.

As a country founded on the concept of freedom, we should look on this past with open eyes, learning how to better act in times of conflict. We learned about the plight of the Jews in the Holocaust in Nazi-era Germany, yet we imprisoned hundreds of thousands of our own people during that same time period. Does this make us the heroes that we are often portrayed or a country that is capable of making and learning from our mistakes like any other?

Sources

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